

## WOMEN--A CONTINUING SOURCE OF FARM LABOR

by  
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All of us, I suppose, were hesitant about women in the beginning. But today we find that women are holding their own. We have come to recognize that women are a vital part of the farm labor force. We have certainly found it so in Michigan. Women have always been an essential force in farm labor, we find in looking back over the figures. But we did not realize it until the farm labor program came along and caused us to start counting farm workers as men, women and youth.

During the war emergency, it was up to each State to determine what would be their program for women and I think it will continue to be that way. As far as the women's program of the future is concerned, some States will be concerned with women workers within their own States. Other States may be working with women who will do farm work outside of the State. I am thinking particularly of migrant families.

We find that a good proportion of our workers come to Michigan in family groups. For instance, we normally use 65,000 farm workers in any year. The members of the farm family furnish 15,000 of these workers, leaving 50,000 seasonal workers to be supplied. Of these, about a half come from within the State and the other half are migrants. And so if we can say that 10,000 women are doing farm work in Michigan, it certainly seems to me that Extension Service should take recognition of that fact and find some of the problems this puts forth.

In any State that uses migrant labor and any State where the crops require a great deal of labor, you simply know that you will find women working. Not only the State that is going to bring in the women has a problem but the State that is going to send the women has a definite responsibility as a part of their farm labor program. The State of origin needs to enroll these workers, find out where they are and how many, and tell these people where they will be needed. We, in the States which use migrants, would like to have them come into our State at the time we need them and in the numbers needed. And for these reasons, we need a cooperative scheme between the States, one that enables workers to know where the work is, what type it is, the living conditions, pay, and what might be expected of them.

The States also have a definite responsibility toward these workers in their normal home economics programs, the responsibility of raising the living standards of these people. If the farm labor programs in the States where the workers originate assumed such responsibility, then there would be a challenge to meet that type of housing and living standards for the migrants after they arrive in the State of need.

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## Six Categories of Women Farm Workers

Several questions arise about women as a continuing source of farm labor. First, we may ask, where do women come from?

1. We must give credit to the women in the grower's family who are working in the fields. Although it is true that they give mainly supervisory work, they do a great deal of work in packing sheds in fruit areas.

2. Local neighborhood women. In Michigan, our berry crops are practically all harvested by local neighborhood women and youth. That will continue to be true. They can earn good pin money and they like the job.

3. Members of migrant families. The women and girls will work in the fields. We have a large group of people to whom we refer as Oakies and Arkies. We recognize them as very highly skilled workers. The growers like this class of worker. Even the women in these family groups are considered skilled labor.

4. Vacationists. Many women come to Michigan in carloads. They take this kind of vacation for two reasons: (1) they want a vacation and do not have enough money to spend on a regular vacation or (2) they want to pick fruit to take back home.

5. Families of general farming families in areas near a fruit area. They generally have a slack time at the time when the fruit ripens.

6. City women--who have been another large source of workers who come out when there is an urgent call to rescue a pressure crop.

## Appropriate Training Essential

What about the skills and abilities of these people? Migrants can be classed as skilled laborers. The women in the farm families and from neighboring farms are partially skilled. Neighborhood women who go out to work become partially skilled through on-the-job training. Nevertheless, many of these women could make use of some training that would improve their speed, and teach them how to do the job easier, better, faster so that the job will be more profitable to them. This is especially true for the vacationist who answers the urgent call for help. Often they know nothing about agriculture or the crop. However, these are the most difficult to train and, on the whole, they never become very skilled or fast.

If we take a look at the skills and abilities of these groups of workers, we find a wide range. We need to classify workers according to skills to determine if and when a training program might be beneficial.

But who is going to be responsible for training these people? If you can get at a training program in advance of the season, that is fine. On the whole, I think a training program must be a joint enterprise among the Extension Service, the farmers and also the workers. We can ask the leaders who come with the migrants to train people in their groups. The Extension program can show the farmer that it will be to his advantage to do some training.



We must make him aware of that before the fruit season sets in. It must be done at an earlier date than we have done it before, and the farmer must be made to realize it is to his advantage to give these people some training on how to do the job.

A winter program for farm labor can include meetings and other contacts with growers and farmers, giving them techniques, employer-employee relationship suggestions, and showing them how to break down a job. We must also show the farmers how to use the bulletins we have prepared for training purposes. We must make them aware that the bulletins are valuable to have and to pass on to the worker.

#### Special WLA Program Not Advisable

Then there is the question of whether or not we should have an organized women's program and the name for it. That will have to be determined by each State. Are we thinking along the right track when we say that an organized program called the Women's Land Army and directed especially to women is not needed? The WLA certainly played its proper role and got the job done during the emergency, when workers were scarce. It assisted in the recruitment job. But perhaps we can say that an organized program especially for women will be needed only when workers are scarce.

We in Michigan feel that women, in normal times, can be considered as a part of the total labor force. They need not be segregated as a special class of workers nor does so much stress need to be placed upon enrolling and placing women as women, except in connection with a definite pressure crop such as cherries or detasseling, for instance.

It seems to me that the attention of State and county farm labor staffs can be focused upon (1) informative publicity; (2) training employers ahead of season; (3) giving on-the-job training when necessary; (4) stressing health and safety while working; and (5) making the employer aware that the stability of his labor force is directly proportionate to the woman's satisfaction with living conditions.

#### Home Economist on Farm Labor Staff

We do need to recognize the fact that women are among farm workers and that it does present some problems. On a permanent farm labor program there should be a home economist's point of view on hand all the time to take care of health, safety, training, supervision, etc. This home economist might be attached either to State or county staffs. She may well be the home demonstration agent in the county, who is asked to include farm labor training in her program and to allot time to it. But do not take it for granted that the home demonstration agent will help unless you ask her to help. Remember that she has a full schedule and that she should know ahead of time that you need her help so that she can plan time for it. If you are in a county where the problem of women is bound to come up, get the home economist's viewpoint and plan so that she will be around when she is needed.

For the 1947 outlook, we have been told that one of the farmer's problems would be getting migrant help and keeping it until the job is completed.



When we get into this a little further, we find, perhaps, that we have not recognized or realized that the stability or mobility of the migrant worker is dependent on the living conditions offered them. Especially is this true if workers have the families with them and, of course, that means that the women folks are along.

#### Working and Living Conditions

We know that the farmers who have had good housing have had less trouble getting and keeping workers, even during the scarcity of labor. A home economist's viewpoint on the county or State staff will be of real value in the improvement of housing and living conditions for workers.

Any State's housing program must be broad and flexible since the standards of living of the people who come in are very wide. Such a program must offer something at least a little better than where the worker came from and it must be within the range of economic possibilities for the crop involved. Naturally, it cannot be expected to be higher than the conditions for farmers growing that crop.

The standards of living for professional migrants have a wide range from the very low to the very high. Take, for instance, workers who travel in trailers. They may have standards that are very high. I understand that some of these bring washing machines right along with them. That means that they will locate where they can have facilities to operate them.

Vacationists from the city will probably live in camps. But they are used to certain conveniences and they must be conditioned in advance publicity not to expect elaborate conveniences which they would have at home. In Michigan, growers are starting to put up cabins for these vacationists. These will be used for the tourist and resort business after the fruit harvest. They are not elaborate, just one-room houses, with a few things built in and cooking facilities. And they are near good water.